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ABSTRACT

Two bilingual education programs serving the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem in New York City were investigated to ascertain the degree and kinds of community participation in planning, implementation, and evaluation of bilingual programs. It was found that while there are formal structures in place for involving the community, such as a district-wide bilingual parents' advisory council, these are not viewed as critical to school or program functioning by either administrators or parents. Since administrators have not taken the community's role in school affairs seriously, they have not assisted parents in organizing themselves and in acquiring the skills necessary to become truly functioning partners in school-community dialogues. Furthermore, both administrators and parents are limited in their views of the roles of community people in the schools: fundraising, general support, and help with homework were cited as possible roles, but classroom teaching, presentation of community skills and resources, or sharing of childrearing and informal education techniques were not mentioned. Parents have no real sense of forming policy and even less of evaluating it. Finally, despite outwardly good intentions, schools do not seem really interested in the kind of community participation which results in any realignment of the basic power relations between school and community. (CMG)

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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION-- ETHNOGRAPHIC INPUT INTO A LANGUAGE PLANNING ISSUE*

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Introduction

Language planning and policy-making are rapidly becoming key processes in the organization and development of multilingual nations. The economic exigencies of modern urban societies, along with mounting political and social demands of minority groups, make careful, systematic, and sensitive language planning a necessity. Language planners have been involved in a variety of questions, including selection of common languages, development of alphabets, promotion of literacy, and modernization and lexical development of both majority and minority languages. As can be seen from these examples, language planning is closely bonded with educational planning.

There are tremendous difficulties inherent in language planning as a means of regulating and determining language use and development, especially with regard to coordinating community expectations with those of legislators and social scientists. Time or money constraints and political demands may make careful consideration of the complexity of societal factors involved nearly impossible. Implementation can be extremely problematic, particularly when community needs have not been sufficiently accounted for in the initial plan formulation. Community resistance can block implementation, just as community support can facilitate it. When a given policy is intended to correct past injustices

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and requires intensive compliance effort, resistance can also be met from the enforcement agencies themselves. This has been very much the case with bilingual education in the U.S., one of the most recent and extensive attempts to incorporate minority parents into the resolution of educational problems.

The study

I am currently in the process of investigating one community's successes and failures in organizing productive forms of school participation. The study utilizes a number of research methods to examine community participation in two contrasting bilingual programs serving the Puerto Rican community of East Harlem in New York City. These fall within an ethnographic framework and include participant observation in school and community settings, informal and formal interviews and written questionnaires with parents, teachers, school administrators, and community activists, examination of school and community documents like school board minutes, local legislation, evaluative reports, Board of Education memos and regulations, as well as various unobtrusive measures.

The study is directed toward ascertaining the degree and kinds of community participation in planning, implementation, and evaluation of bilingual programs, in order to contribute to the forging of a language education policy for the Puerto Rican population in New York, an effort already initiated by the work of the National Puerto Rican Task Force on Educational Policy (1977) and the Language Policy Task Force of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, City University New York (LPTF 1978, 1980, 1982).

The two sites

Ideally, community participation in education should serve as a means of compelling schools to become more fully accountable and responsive to the populations they serve as well as a means for parents to have input into the determination of their children's educational and economic futures. An increasing number of studies have shown that such participation is extremely valuable to both school and community, especially when it takes the form of carefully planned, long-term programs utilizing community resources in the educational process (Henderson 1981). A few exemplary programs exist across the country in which parents are fully involved and trained to better understand the program's goals and thereby help improve their children's attitudes and performance (e.g. Un Marco Abierto program of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation in Michigan). However, for the most part, parents' reluctance to interfere with the perceived task of educators has combined with the even greater reluctance of schools to have their authority threatened and resulted in community participation in bilingual education which (when documented at all) is limited and uneven in nature.

This is definitely the case with the two programs I have been examining in East Harlem. Although the East Harlem school district organized itself around the issue of bilingual education in the early 70's, a grassroots struggle which resulted in a court decree which governs bilingual programs in New York City to this day, the early fervor has died down to a great extent and complacency has set in. All of the formal requirements for community participation are in place (i.e. a parent association in each school, a district-wide bilingual parents

advisory council, parent representation on lunch, discipline, and school improvement committees, and parent conferences and workshops on a fairly regular basis). However, beneath these formal trappings lies a very circumscribed and variable school/community relationship.

Comparison of the two schools is particularly enlightening in this regard. Although the two are only six blocks apart, they serve somewhat different populations. School A is in a long-time Puerto Rican neighborhood. The bilingual program, which is physically integrated into the main school, services Hispanic children almost exclusively, and Spanish-dominant ones at that. School B is in an ethnically more heterogeneous neighborhood. The bilingual program is isolated from the rest, one of several virtually independent programs within the school. It services Black and other non-Hispanic children along with both English and Spanish dominant Hispanics. There are between 200 and 250 children in each of the bilingual programs.

School A has had a parent association functioning for a long time; however, until this year, the PA was dominated by parents whose children were not in the bilingual program, and the leadership had a limited appreciation of and often hostile feelings toward bilingual education. In its latest incarnation, the PA is led by a group of young, inexperienced bilingual parents who are having great difficulty in getting organized. In School B, the PA responds most directly to the concerns and needs of the main school, and few bilingual program parents participate. The perception of the bilingual program parents is that the PA is for Black parents, despite the fact that the president is Puerto Rican. Thus participation of bilingual program parents is strictly on

a class-by-class basis rather than through the formal organization.

The school administration's role in supporting and providing opportunities for community involvement also varies in the two schools, although the end results are the same. In School A, the recently-tenured Puerto Rican principal is well-regarded by the parents and has been supportive of the PA and the bilingual program. However, despite his warmth and openness, this principal has a limited view of what parents could do in his school, and he has not served as a leader in broadening school-community interface. In School B, the principal has a very different personal style, and is regarded as a rather cold fish by many, as he prefers to govern from within his office. He is of the opinion that parents should be agents for change and progress for their own individual children (and has indeed been of assistance in a number of individual cases), but feels that in groups parents set themselves up as adversaries to school administrators. His relationship with the PA can only be described as hostile, though this may change as he is expecting tenure this year. He has been very supportive of bilingual education, but overall has left the program to run itself.

The coordinators of the two programs are also quite different. In School A there has been a single coordinator since the program's inception, who has made varying efforts to get bilingual parents involved, primarily via informative workshops and orientation sessions. Aside from this, parent involvement is left up to individual teachers, some of whom visit homes and get parents to work with their children, others of whom do not consider such activities as part of their jobs, beyond the formal requirements of parent-teacher conferences twice a year.

In School B, there have been several coordinators since the program was established, none of whom has had a really strong commitment to parental involvement. The general feeling is that parents are most supportive when children do well, and emphasis has been placed on that. The current policy is to have parents check and sign homework, appear for Puerto Rican Discovery Day luncheon and parent-teacher night, and generally cooperate with the program.

Without exception all of the parents I have talked to in both schools are greatly concerned about their children and anxious to help them succeed. Because of cultural traditions, the responsibility for educating children and dealing with schools falls primarily to the mothers; however, more and more Puerto Rican women are entering the workforce, and school-related tasks are increasingly being carried out by other relatives and even fathers, when not put aside completely. Despite these shifts, events and meetings continue to be scheduled in early morning hours. Teachers and administrators are reluctant to come into the barrio on week-ends or stay late in evenings, feeling that any improvement in attendance is not worth the extra effort.

The majority of the bilingual program parents are very supportive of bilingual education and say that they want their children to be adept in both languages in order to get ahead. I have noticed this year that more of the parents are able to describe with some degree of accuracy the program's goals and practices. However, relatively few of them come to school other than to pick up their children or check on them at lunch-time. The PA's in both schools depend on the same small circle of women who do all the work, while 30-40 mothers hover

over their children in the cafeteria or playground.

A number of rationales are offered by the non-participating mothers, including too many responsibilities, no time, too many children, physical illness, etc., all legitimate in themselves. However, the most commonly recurring (and most serious, in my opinion) excuses are that they honestly do not think they have anything to offer the school and if they do, they really do not think it will change anything. If this is true, it is a serious indictment of the school system and merits immediate attention.

Summary of findings

To summarize the preliminary findings of this study:

My fieldwork so far indicates that while there are formal structures in place for involving the community in bilingual education, these are not viewed as critical to school or program functioning by either administrators or parents. A small core of regulars (generally non-working mothers of lower-grade children) show up for meetings and have carved out a social niche for themselves in the school. They do not, however, represent the totality of parents, nor have there been well-organized efforts to unify parents behind common goals and needs.

Since administrators have not taken the community's role in school affairs seriously, they have not assisted parents in organizing themselves and in acquiring the skills necessary to become truly fundtioning partners in school-community dialogues. As a result, school administrators are constantly trying to initiate activities and then despairing of lack of interest or follow-up on the part of parents.

In general, bilingual program parents are becoming better informed about bilingual education as their children progress through the grades.

However, given their low attendance at meetings, it appears that word of mouth and life experience have had more to do with this than occasional workshops. Parent association members who do not have children in bilingual classes still have a good many misconceptions about bilingual education, although there is a general attitude among the Puerto Rican parents that all children should have the right to learn in Spanish and English if they need or want to.

Both administrators and parents tend to be limited in their views of the roles of community people in the schools, citing fund-raising, general support, help with homework, but not classroom teaching, presentation of community skills and resources, sharing of child-rearing and informal education techniques, etc. Aside from signing off on proposals, parents do not have a real sense of forming policy, and less of evaluating it. Input is restricted to individual complaints or crisis-oriented issues rather than consistent long-term efforts to change and improve school conditions.

While the bilingual program does have a number of inherently community-oriented features (e.g. the ability to deal with community residents in their own language and the inclusion of certain community cultural patterns in the curriculum), these are utilized more in social "stroking" rather than in developing parents' capacity to become involved productively. It seems that despite outwardly good intentions, schools are not really interested in the kinds of community participation which result in any realignment of the basic power relations existing between school and community. Parents are seen as helpful and supportive when

they raise funds and check homework, but when they meddle in policy, they become problems. And yet in the long run, the genuine involvement of community residents in school matters would probably lessen the burden of school officials and make solution of a number of problems possible.

Conclusions

Within the same school district, a number of parents have come to the conclusion after weathering the decentralization and community control storms of the 60's and early '70's that public schools are not about to change to reflect community needs and wants. Their contention is that educators have focussed upon improving personnel and methodology in schools instead of analyzing the nature of the institution itself and its interaction with the community and society outside of the classroom. As a result, these parents have turned to "alternative" or "independent" public schools which are freer to engage in an honest critique of the educational system. Several of these schools are operative in the district and provide evidence that parents can be much more directly involved in the education of children than envisioned by most traditional schools, with the only additional expenses being time and commitment on the part of school officials and parents. Such schools maintain constant communication with parents via weekly newsletters, visits, conferences, and written evaluations rather than report cards.

Unfortunately, until very recently with the inauguration of an experimental K-12 school in the district, the bilingual centers have operated basically in the traditional mode and not profited from the

advances made in the alternative schools. Based upon my observations, I would like to suggest a few avenues for change that could improve the likelihood of productive parent participation in the bilingual programs, and which, if shown to be effective, should be incorporated as part of language education policy.

First of all, the formal organizations of parents must be given more than advisory capacities if they are to take themselves, (and be taken) seriously. They must be involved in program-monitoring, problem-solving, and staff support, no matter how time-consuming and initially irritating it may be to school authorities. Administrators and teachers must be committed to being accountable to parents (who are, after all, their real bosses) and to facilitating and participating in open communication with community residents in both structured and spontaneous encounters. Procedural changes and decision-making must be explained to all parties concerned and carried out with their participation. This does not mean pro forma quarterly meetings, but day-to-day honest-to-goodness wrangling over issues that count. Finally, schools should provide parents with opportunities for personal and professional growth as a form of team development, whose ultimate beneficiaries are children. All of this can be done only via constant, diligent, and creative effort.

Currently there is a struggle being waged in New York City to defend bilingual education against illegal and unilateral attempts by the Board of Education to coerce the ever-growing Hispanic community into putting its children into English-only programs, which are falsely billed as academically superior. Parents of children in bilingual and in

regular programs are working side by side in an almost unprecednted manner to protect community residents' rights to have a say in what happens to their children. I have become involved, along with other researchers, in attempting to provide basic information about the relative benefits of different language policies, the factors which contribute to or obstruct community participation, and the ways of improving school-community relations which have proven successful in the past and in other areas. Hopefully, this struggle can serve as a starting point for communities and schools in New York and desires, always with the children's welfare as the chief priority. And hopefully strong, meaningful policy will emerge that will finally allow these children to see their parents as active agents in their own destinies, rather than objects of manipulation from on high.

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